



Figure 1: *On Innards Publication*. Promotion photographs. Nash, R., (2015) Launched at the London Art Book Fair, Whitechapel Gallery in 2015 and selected finalist for KALIED 2016 Oslo.

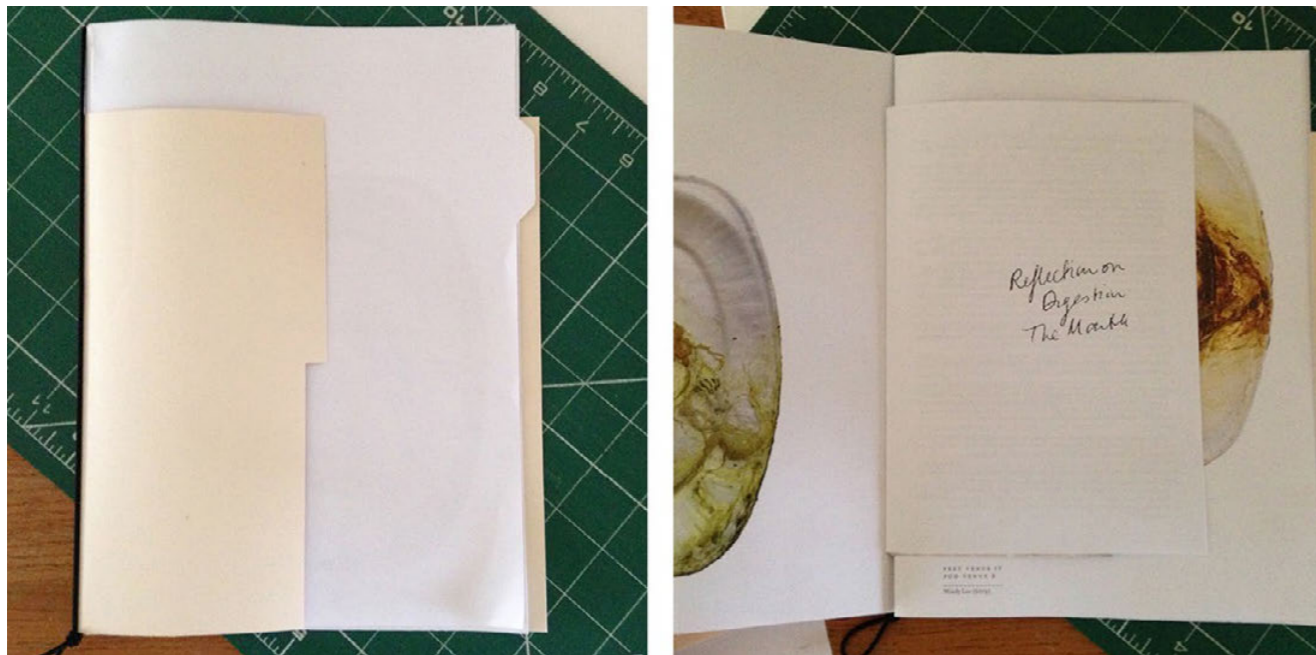


Figure 2: *On Innards Publication*. Stages of research documentation, Nash, R. (2014-15). Experimentation with form and curation.

## Navigating co-creation and collaboration through Artists' Publishing

Richard Nash

Attending the Small Publishers Fair, London, with bookRoom Press in 2014, a conversation started between Amanda Couch and myself about joining a research group called On Innards, and how I might help facilitate the creation of an artist's book to bring together and extend an existing body of work. Little did I know at that point, firstly, the complexity of what I was agreeing to, and secondly, how important this project would be, in that the insights still permeate through my research and practice with a focus on collaboration and co-creation over the last 10 years.

This paper represents the thread through my research and practice, and specifically three key projects in a cross-analysis and discussion of the findings. The works in question are, 1) *On Innards Publication* (2015), 2) *Non-Sequitur* (2021), and 3) *Re: Infinite Dialogue* (2023). A summary outline will be provided below to give context. However, the discussion will move beyond the specificity of each work to focus on the insights into navigating co-creation and collaboration through discussing the book as firstly a 'third space' (Potter and McDougall, 2017), and secondly as a 'boundary object' (Star, 1989, 2010).

Extensive research exists on multidisciplinary, collaboration and communities involved in artists' publishing as a practice (Bodman, 2018, Taylor, 2017), and how this results in the artists' books' 'mongrel' nature (Burkhart, 2006); that is its porous and mutable qualities that evade neat definition. However, beyond specific examples, the *Xerox project* (1968), as an example is often held as a precedent, limited research exists on the methods used and discussion around vital considerations, i.e., methods for facilitating collaboration, navigating materials, mediating hierarchies, etc. Ultimately, how does the site and form of the book become a method for collaboration? How exactly does the collaboration take place and in what way? And under what conditions? This is where my thought process, investigation and practice have been focused, and the central topic for this paper.

Even the now renowned *Xerox project* (1968) does not elaborate on the specificity of the collaborative process beyond an act of standardisation and conversation (Dyment, 2012), Seth Siegelau in 1999 states,

*It was an attempt to consciously standardize, in terms of an exhibition, book, or project, the conditions of production underlying the exhibition process. It was*

*the first exhibition in fact where I asked the artists to do something, and it was probably somewhat less collaborative than I am now making it sound. But I do have the impression that the close working relationship with the artist was an important factor of all the projects.*

## On Innards Publication (2015)

### Context

*On Innards* (see Figure 1) started with a collaboration between Amanda Couch, Andrew Hladky and Mindy Lee. *On Innards* as a project explores our understanding of reflection and digestion, as a metaphor and literal bodily process, and how our guts can destabilise our sense of self. The three artists initiated the project, which was presented as a three-way conversation at the interdisciplinary conference 'Body Horror' (2013) in Athens. Subsequently in 2014, an exhibition and event evolved from this, which included a multidisciplinary group crossing fields of art, illustration, performance, writing, virology, gastroenterology, and yoga, amongst others. The wider group included contributions from Carlo Comanducci, Giskin Day, Dr Simon Gabe, Kerry Gallagher, Jenny Pengilly, Nathaniel Storey, and Jamie Sutcliffe. I joined the project in 2014, to distil and reconceive the vast range of materials in the form of a hybrid research journal and artist's book. The hybridity of the artists' book form was intended to mimic the language of a cabinet of curiosities aligning with Drucker's (2004) classification of the 'catalogue as artist's book'.

### Methods

The process of working (see Figure 2) started with collating the vast collection of materials together into a Google Drive folder. Somewhat unaware of what I was setting into, I was, to be very honest, completely overwhelmed by the sheer quantity but also the range of media and disparate qualities and languages of everything provided. This included, but not limited to; photographic/digital reproductions of artworks and performances as well as sound files, and videos; different forms of writing, from scientific papers to narrative fiction; and a range of PowerPoint presentations, which varied heavily in visual language and content, from conceptual outlines of artistic and curatorial practices to scientific explanations of medical processes and procedures.

One of the first decisions made was to typeset the three-way conversation on a large, printed concertina, with the text stacked in columns notionally mimicking twisted intestines. This became my initiating brief for the three artists, to reflect on and make edits and interventions,



Figure 3: *Non Sequitur*. Research documentation, Nash, R. (2020).

materially, visually, and textually. Although not conceived to be by design, this later became the central form of the artist's book and was further extended on the reverse into a four-way conversation including myself in the discussion. While this process took place remotely, my own process started to identify the structure and narrative. Working through the sum of the parts, a concept of the literal digestion process was conceived.

Translating the materials and languages started as a process of printing and looking for semiotic relationships through sequencing and paring as well as through reworking, reinterpreting and extending. There was a conceptual link to digestion in how this developed over a period of months; it was slow and physical and also deeply reflective. Meetings with the three artists took place at several points in the process where we discussed how it was progressing and where further unique pieces might be conceived for the book. This continued through to the first artists' proof. A decision was made to outsource the printing, while we agreed to complete all other aspects within the bookRoom facilities at UCA, Farnham. Over the course of an intense week, the four of us worked together, sharing every aspect of this time and in every way how the final limited edition was completed.

and personal stories about the research process and experiences rather than purely the insights from the already published network report. Undertaking the workshop through Zoom, the results of the storyboard were digitally dissected and entered into a database of a generative collaborative tool developed in Processing 3. Working with the collaborative tool introduced an element of chance in reconfiguring the new storyboard constructions. Limited research also existed in relation to collaborating with a non-human entity, so this aspect of the method revealed new insights beyond the specificity of the initial research study (Nash, et al. 2021). The process of modularising and recontextualising the outcomes was intended to reveal constellations beyond linear connections.

The results from the collaborative tool were printed and bound, and sent via postal service to each member of the team as a round-robin process. *Non-Sequitur* was the resulting experimental zine developed by bringing together all the collated materials into a notional facsimile, embracing the imperfections and highlighting the traces, materials, and process of the zine's journey of the round-robin and the individual interventions by the members of the group. This included material, visual and textual interventions made into the zine as well as various envelopes and postage marks, paper-based hyperlinks, e.g., QR codes linking to experimental video and soundscapes, additional materials, and the development of AR overlays.

### Non Sequitur (2021)

#### Context

The initial body of research was developed by Dr Eleanor Dare, Dr Steve Love, Angus Main, Prof John Potter, Deborah Rodrigues and Dr Dylan Yamada-Rice (see Figure 3). The research group were brought together as part of an AHRC/ESRC-funded Japan/UK Network project that explored location-based Virtual Reality (VR) experiences for children. After a preliminary discussion with the group, I joined in 2020 to reconceive the final network report, Yamada-Rice, et al (2020), to distil new findings centred on artists' publishing and practice-based methods. The proposed methods for an in-person workshop were quickly redefined in response to the COVID emergency remote working conditions. Arguably, a more interesting process was developed in mediating geographic distance and the challenges of working in an online environment.

#### Methods

The resulting process centred on a narrative collage method (see Figure 4) through storyboarding the researcher's experiences (Kostera, 2006). While the storyboard method is established within ethnographic research studies, emphasis was also placed on the conceptual and contextual links to the research study through its consideration of comic book traditions in Japan and the UK. I was interested in their anecdotes

### Re: Infinite Dialogue (2023)

#### Context

The 'Re-' project (see Figure 5) began as a collaboration between myself and Gary Clough, with subsequent contributions from Anna Beel, Dr Susannah Haslam, Adam Knight, Alkesh Parmar, Dr Kyung Hwa Shon, and Isabel Young. Returning to in-person working conditions the project started without initial funding as an opportunity to (re-)visit and (re-)contextualise the methods that had been originally proposed in the previous Japan/UK Network project prior to changes due to COVID. The notion of returning, revisiting and reconfiguring became the initiating concept as a response to the etymological meaning of the prefix 're-' (Nash, 2024).

#### Methods

Building on the insights gained from the previous projects my intentions for *Re-* focussed on the process rather than the outcome, that is to say a form of structuring to facilitate and also an observation of the ecology of undetermined actions. The open-ended process of collaboration was designed around the notion

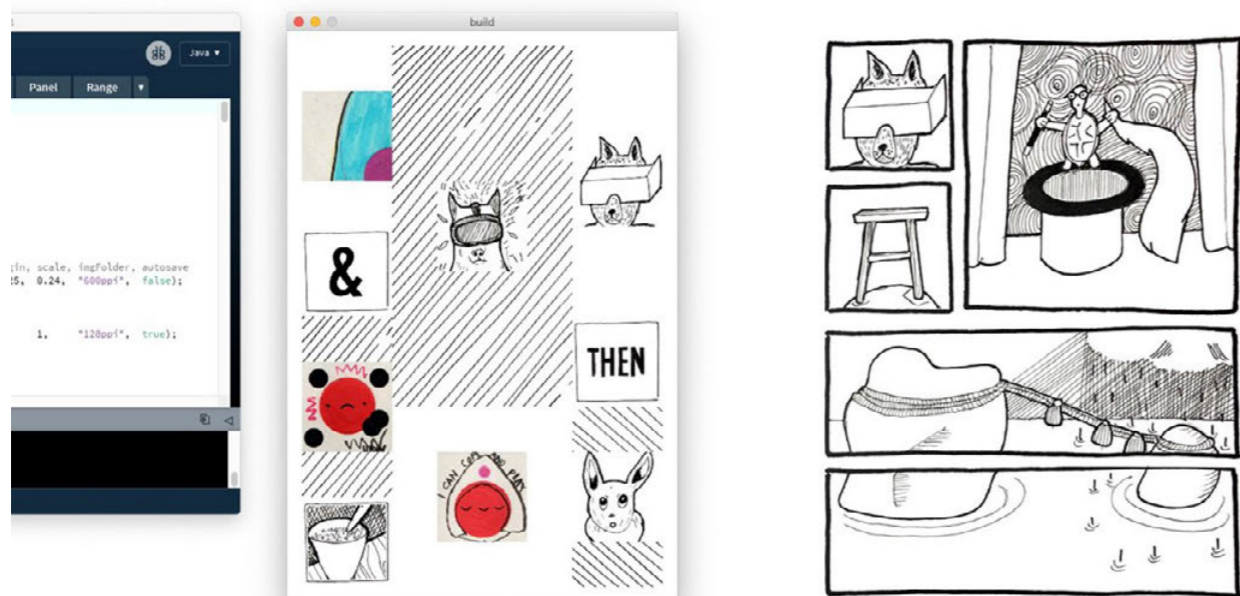


Figure 4: *Non Sequitur*. Research documentation, Nash, R. (2020). Left: a screenshot of the collaborative tool. Right: workshop storyboard example by Yamada-Rice, D.

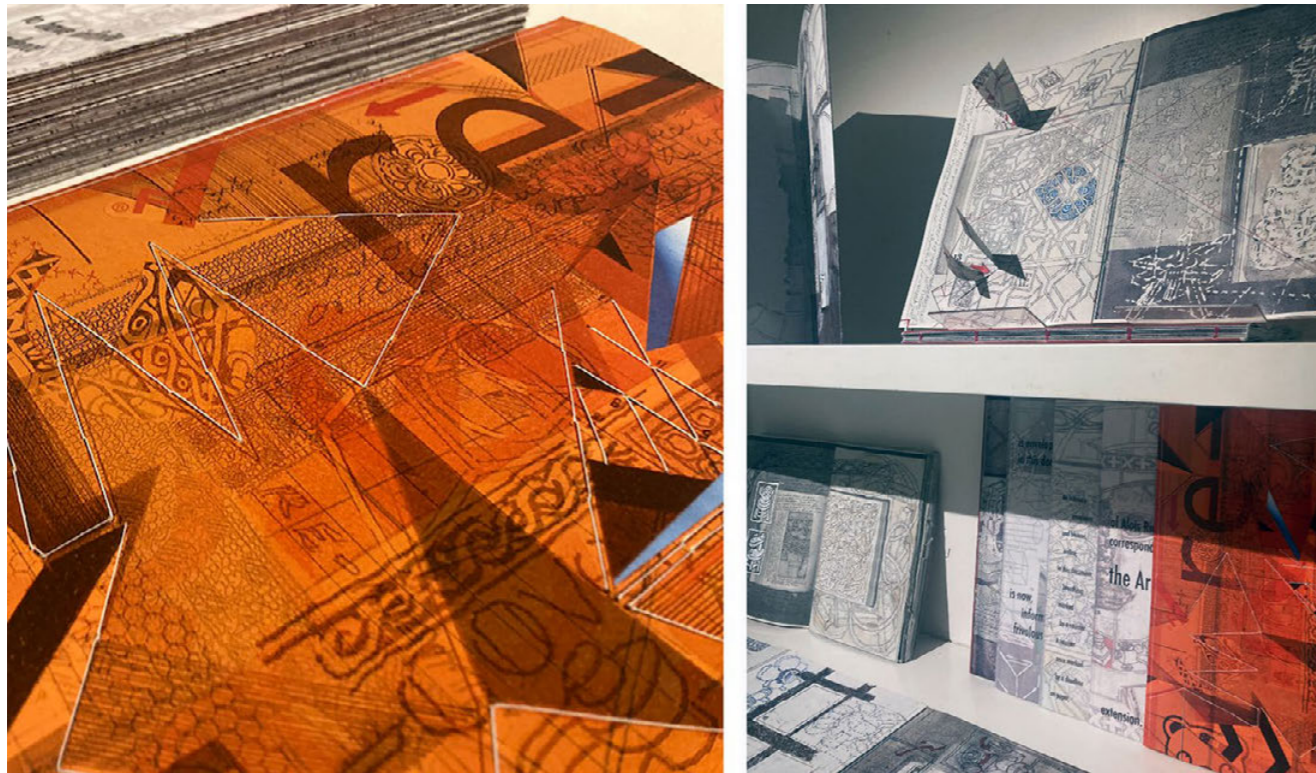


Figure 5: *Re: Infinite Dialogue*. Exhibition documentation. Preparation and developmental stages for Edition 3. Fictions (2022) Blyth Gallery, Imperial College, London.

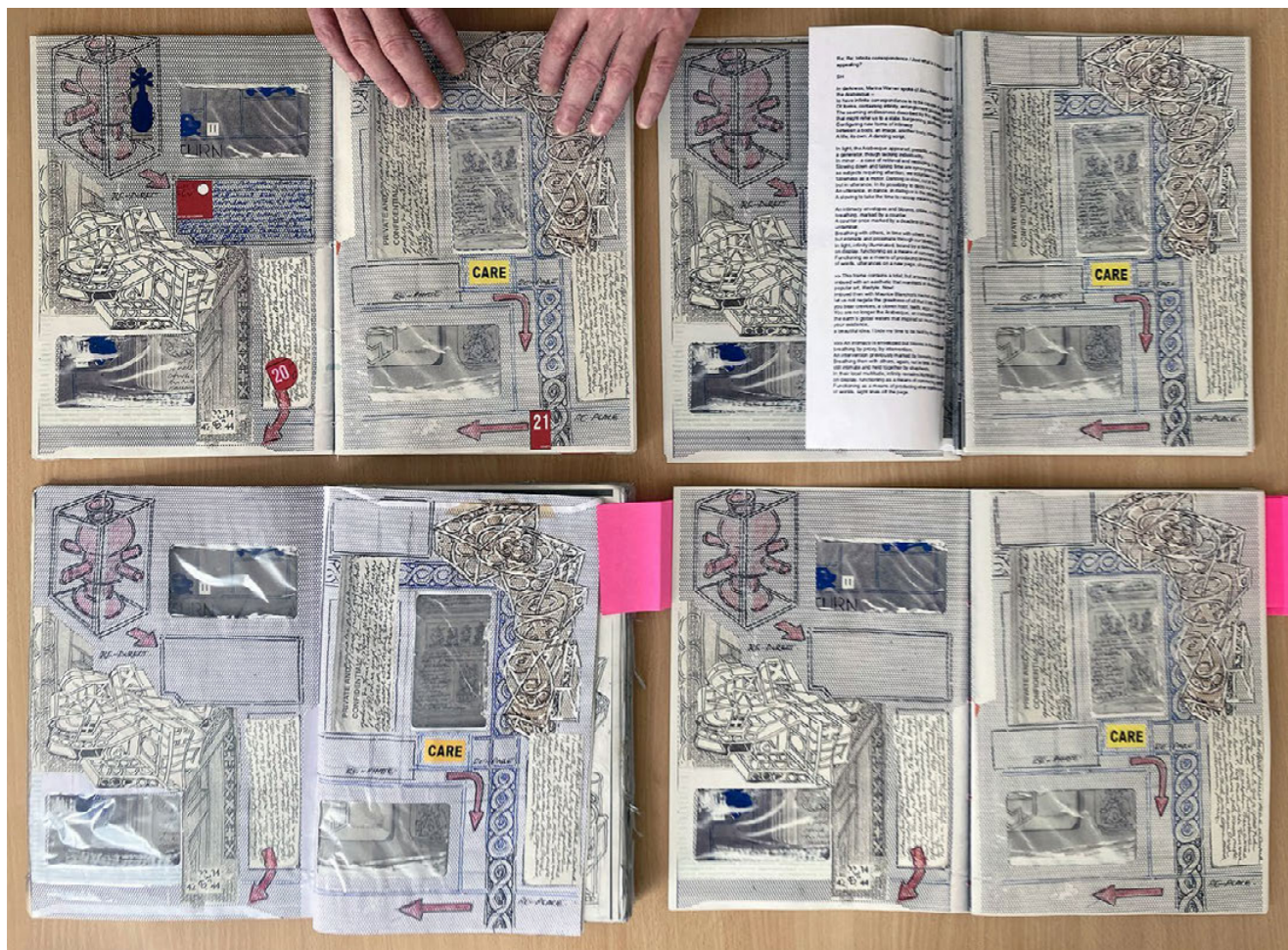


Figure 6: *Re: Infinite Dialogue*. Research documentation, Nash, R. (2022). Original photocopy bottom left with subsequent variants of the second facsimile edition.

of editions and verbatim facsimiles. This was aligned to Dedner's (2006) classifications of source text and genetic variants promoted through the collaborative process. The first edition was created through the process of photocopying 15 years of Gary Clough's sketchbooks. A numerical limitation was applied to determine the specific pages. These were bound without imposition to immediately decontextualise the material. This first version was given to Clough to work into over 14 days.

The resulting reworked book of photocopies (see Figure 6) was then digitalised without further editing and reproduced as a second edition in a limited run of eight copies. A single copy was given to each contributor to respond to. The range of responses and interventions included, interventions into the book in the form of drawing, annotating, collage and paper engineering and stitching as well as a series of responses in the form of single large prints, graphic/typographic cyanotypes, a written script and shredding the book to create handmade recycled paper. Initiating a process of synthesis required a complex task of recording and documenting the eight variants. In undertaking this activity, a primary objective was to privilege what could be newly created and configured rather than to simply bring together the sum of the parts. Through the analysis a constellation of located relational concepts and concerns directly informed nodes of dialogue and anchorage for new narratives, editing, and curation. From this, a final synthesis edition emerged, albeit determined final rather than exhausted.

#### Discussion and Insights

My research into collaboration and co-creation has involved understanding this from a pedagogic perspective for collaborative research practice as well as concerning the values, motivations and conceptual, virtual and physical spaces involved. From the outline of the three case study projects, the insights have been considered in relation to two areas for discussion. These are 1) The book as a third space, and 2) The book as a boundary object.

#### The Book as a Third Space

Zamenopoulos and Alexiou (2018) outline useful definitions of understanding and conceiving structures of organising collaboration; 'collective, connective, collaborative and cooperative.'

Each work revealed an altogether different formalisation of what collaboration can be, and the actions, spaces, and agreements that structure co-creation. At times this is closer, e.g., the week of sharing the time and activity of making *On Innards* in the bookRoom Press bindery, or the initiating workshops for *Non-Sequitur* which mediated collaboration through the Zoom space

simultaneously constructing storyboards involving a non-human entity in the form of the collaborative tool. At points, the particular activities involved shifted the collaboration towards more collective, connected, and cooperative notions of agreement in working together. Here we might consider the round-robin method in both *On Innards* and *Non-Sequitur*, and the notion of variant editions in *Re: Infinite Dialogue*.

From collaboration to co-creation requires an even more complex and challenging set of approaches and conditions, and a certain amount of courage on the part of the researcher to partially or fully relinquish control. Potter, one of the collaborators on *Non-Sequitur* and several projects since, has discussed in depth the virtues of a 'third space' (Potter and McDougall, 2017), in context specifically around working with children. This third space represents a view of literacies as being dynamic where social actors are researchers of their lived experiences. And how media can create a third space, in the context of home, school, and community, that education practice can shift and challenge the dynamics of epistemological power relations. Where Potter and McDougall position a third space in respect to digital media, I would argue that the affordances of the book as a method can offer an alternative third space via its openness, material immediacy and mobility.

While these are useful from a structural view, they don't recognise the embodied nature of what it really means to collaborate, emotionally and physically, to be with and to share, to be heard and to listen: all of which come with accountability and responsibility. Here we might reflect on Seth Siegelau's (1999) quote earlier in this text, in the sense that the relationship is perhaps as important, or even more important, than the defined actions. We may think of the process as an 'art of conversation' as a way to recognise others (Szewczyk, 2009). We might reconsider collaboration, not as the organisation of practitioners and practices, but as a third space that enables building bridges, communities and understandings. We should be aware of and sensitive to processes of mediation and remediation, especially at points of collaborative stickiness and oppositional views. This is, I recognise, something that is political in as much as aesthetic.

#### The Book as a Boundary Object

The term 'bookishness' has become accepted into a common vernacular to refer to all things relating to the book, in line with Pressman's (2009) definition of a new status of the book as an object and symbol. I first heard the term used by Silke Dettmer during my undergraduate studies, many years before Pressman's now often-quoted essay. This is where I have developed my own definition of an artist's book as having 'a unique relational position in constantly bordering with otherness, while also always

retaining the essence of bookishness' (Nash et al., 2021, Nash, 2024). My definition of the essence of bookishness comes from a broader perspective rather than being specifically about the artist's book, or artists' publishing more broadly. For this discussion, we might consider Pressman's (2009) all-encompassing view of bookishness positioned from a global rather than narrowly Western perspective.

Much of the research here, and certainly in relation to the later works presented, I have discussed with the notion of positioning the book as a method for mediation and reflection rather than a format for dissemination, or as an outcome. In the positioning of the method, I discuss how the book, and its bookishness, has a relationship to many people, communities, and practices, albeit open to different interpretations of what book might mean, what the relationship is, and the positionalities involved. Here we can reflect on Star's (2010) concept of the 'boundary object'. Star discusses in her later reflections (2010) from the original 1989 article, the concept of the parameters, per se, of a boundary object. While Star (2010) does come close to defining the book as a boundary object through a range of examples, e.g., printed matter, notebooks, and the library or repository, it is in this definition that I position the book as discussed in this paper. A shared object, flexible enough to be open to interpretation and with certain affordances and sites for mediating and remediating meaning through collaboration.

In developing a scaffolding framework for collaboration through *Re: Infinite Dialogue* (2024) and considering the book as a boundary object (Star, 2010) highlights the importance of the organisational structures involved. Where Star (2010) discusses in depth the qualities of embeddedness, transparency, and multiple aspects considering communities of practice, so the scaffolding framework provided the opportunity for both ill-structured and structured ways of working with and against the book. Against in the positive sense that, for example, one copy was shredded to be made into recycled paper. Through the analysis and subsequent mediation and remediation of the materials also highlighted the vital need to be attentive to the hierarchies of practices and practitioners. This is also where I would situate and be aware of my role, moving between collaborator and researcher, and my invisible labour in materialising the form of the book. This is where Star (2010) notes the 'invisible' or 'backstage' work. Here I reflect on discussing the research while talking through *Re: Infinite Dialogue* (2024) and the immediate response was to be asked, "what had I done".

## Conclusion

This paper presents a thread of insights and reflection through three case study projects in relation to how artists' publishing can be deployed as a collaborative method in qualitative research. Through the discussion, I have highlighted how our understanding of 'bookishness', i.e., material immediacy, universality, cultural recognition, and openness to interpretation, can be positioned in research as both a boundary object and as a method through which collaboration can take place. The case studies have shown how positioning the book as a method highlights its unique set of qualities to distil, reveal, navigate, mediate, and remediate diverse perspectives, positions, practices, and knowledges. I have discussed, via the projects and insights, the method involved in each study, and how the agreed scaffolding frameworks and organisational structures have been redefined to the contexts and conditions. I propose that while the examples outlined in this paper demonstrates its potential in multidisciplinary contexts, I maintain that they also merely scratch the surface of its potential in complex studies, especially in relation to STEM/STEAM. As reflected on Star's (2009) boundary object, or Potter and McDougall's (2017) third space, the book has the potential to create spaces that transgress power relations and hierarchies in research, situating all actors involved as specialists of their lived experience. Furthermore, artists' publishing, and the methods involved in the creation, can offer a unique and inclusive space for voices that are excluded and marginalised. Subsequently, it allows a pathway for these voices to be sensitively and thoughtfully centred or recentred within public and institutional collections.

*Richard Nash's* practice is rooted in the artist's book as a primary medium and form of radical publishing. Experimental and often research-led in approach, Richard's work takes the form of serial publications or notional iterative editions, produced in singular and limited production runs. Richard's approach to writing as a visual arts practice draws heavily on experimental strategies and lineages to conceptual writing and concrete poetry, and how this informs contemporary typographic practice and its relationship to the page.

Royal College of Art, London, UK  
richard.nash@rca.ac.uk  
<https://metapoiesis.co.uk>

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